

VZCZCXRO1817
PP RUEHDE RUEHDIR
DE RUEHDO #1214/01 3640631
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 300631Z DEC 07
FM AMEMBASSY DOHA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7427
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 001214

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KWMN](#) [QA](#)

SUBJECT: EMPOWERING QATARI WOMEN TO TACKLE FAMILY VIOLENCE

¶1. The Qatar Supreme Council for Family Affairs (SCFA) organized November 25-26 a workshop on combating violence against women, a subject once considered taboo in Qatar. Even today, the Qatari Criminal Code does not define punishments or penalize offenders in this regard. Likewise, Qatar has not ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women under the pretext that some gender-related clauses are not in line with Islamic principles. The November 25 discussions centered on the findings of the first study of its kind on "violence against women in Qatari society," followed by remarks and discussions coming from the floor about the study and its findings.

Widespread Violence against Women

¶2. Consistent with the SCFA's commitment to establishing a legal system responsive to familial relationships and needs, the SCFA marked the International Day for Eliminating Violence against Women (November 25), by organizing the seminar at which Dr. Kulthum Al-Ghanim, a Qatar University Professor of Social Sciences, presented the findings of her first study of its kind on violence against women in Qatar. She surveyed 2,787 female students at Qatar University, 84.9 percent of whom were Qataris between the ages of 17 and 25. Of those surveyed, 24 percent had been exposed to violence from male family members; beatings and physical assaults were the most prevalent form of domestic violence. 64 percent of respondents reporting being subjected to violence said they had been beaten. The study also registered other forms of abuse, such as the suppression of freedom, humiliation, divorce threats, forced pregnancy, rape, and sexual harassment. According to the study, husbands were the primary abusers, followed by brothers and then fathers.

Culture of Silence

¶3. Al-Ghanim noted that 62.69 percent of these women reported not seeking assistance of any kind outside of the home, particularly from official agencies. According to the study, there was a lack of awareness and trust in these agencies' ability to protect victims. Since police in Qatar are reluctant to treat family violence against women as a criminal matter, the prevailing perception of police, explained Al-Ghanim, is that such violence is a "normal family issue" that should be addressed through mediation, if at all. The absence of criminal laws in this regard further deters women from coming forward to report violence to which they are subjected at home, she observed. Al-Ghanim indicated that social and family pressures further prevent victims from reporting incidents to anyone outside the home. According to the study, more than half of the women surveyed reported having attempted suicide because of the "culture of silence" surrounding assaults on women by family members.

Men Should "Discipline" Women

14. One key finding of the study was that 41.97 percent of the women surveyed said they deserved the violence committed against them; 37 percent stated that men should discipline women and that women generally need "someone" to discipline them. These outcomes, based on discussion at the conference, reflected the traditional family order in Qatar, where women are perceived as weak and fragile persons in need of protection and custody. Based on her study, Al-Ghanim, in addressing the workshop, called for a renewed emphasis on educating women, as it plays a key role in forming and improving their self-image.

Social Analysis of the Phenomenon

15. As part of her study, Al-Ghanim offered a social analysis of the phenomenon of violence against women in Qatar. Based on her findings, she said the Qatari family structure has a direct impact on women's social status within the family. She cited prevailing tribal values and customs exemplified by the saying, "A sister is but one hair in her brother's beard," as negatively affecting women's status and contributing to their diminished social rights. Society's prevailing values have also, Al-Ghanim maintained, increased women's exposure to social violence, deprived them of control of their finances, and subjected them to male dominance in deciding matters of marriage and divorce. Also, she said, also largely determined the quantity and quality of education for girls, made decisions concerning women's employment, and

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decided other family matters requiring the consent and approval of husbands.

The Vital Need to Build a Statistical Database

16. According to Al-Ghanim, official government data on the abuse of women is neither accurate nor detailed. The one exception is a report by the Qatar Foundation for Women's and Children's Protection (QFWCP). It referenced 55 cases of violence against women -- 34 against Qatari women and 21 against non-Qatari women -- in 2005. What stands out in those numbers, Al-Ghanim observed, is the high number of cases involving Qatari women, especially since foreign women outnumber Qatari women approximately four to one. Al-Ghanim added that statistics from the Ministry of the Interior noted 65 cases of family violence dealt with by the Crime and Offenses Court and Social Status Office. Of these cases, 32 came before the Offenses Court and five before the Criminal Court. The cases referred to the latter body include three pre-meditated murders and two assaults. Finally, Al-Ghanim reported that 37 claims of family violence were addressed in the Family Status Courts. Here again, though, the official government statistics are short on detail.

Call to Amend Related Legislation

17. In her remarks to the conference, Al-Ghanim made several recommendations, among which were:

- Increasing the role of decision-makers, public opinion leaders, civil society institutions and academic centers and institutions of the international community in protecting women against violence;

- Promoting a family environment devoid of violence against

women;

-- Laying out a national strategy to combat violence against women;

-- Amending the criminal code to create statutes on domestic violence;

-- Establishing a reliable statistical database.

¶8. In line with the above recommendations, the SCFA Secretary General told us the goal of organizing this event

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was to prepare society for new legislation tackling domestic violence and, in particular, violence against women. Secretary General Abdullah bin Nasser Al-Khalifa added that

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the SCFA hoped to initiate legislation in this regard in the near future.

Call for Special Courts to Tackle Family Violence

¶9. The participants at a round-table discussion following the conference complimented Al-Ghanim's recommendations, which were the highlight of the event, and went beyond them in certain regards. For example, they called for establishing special courts to tackle family violence. Some of the round-table participants further advocated amendments to the current criminal code to address family violence as well as revision of all other current laws related to families. Others called for a brand-new, all-encompassing law on family violence. Among the distinguished local and regional figures participating in the round-table discussion were Ferida Al-Obeidly, Director-General of the QFWCP; Hassan Al-Sayed, Dean of the Law Faculty at Qatar University; Fawziya Al-Obeidly, Qatari Lawyer; Asma Al-Ajmi, Kuwaiti lawyer; and Supreme Judicial Council Judge Omer. The conference was moderated by Noor Al-Malki, Director of the Women's Department at the SCFA.
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